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Assessing transformative learning in teacher education

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‘An effective teacher education program demonstrates the transformative power of learning for individuals and communities.’

(Association of Canadian Deans of Education, in Grimmet et al. 2009: 26)

The association of Canadian Deans of Education has formulated principles of teacher education which stress the transformative power of education for children and their communities. Arguably, the potential power of teacher education lies not just in this aim, but also lies in the transformations that student teachers experience during initial teacher education. I am a teacher of ‘professional studies’ in teacher education: that is, the programme element which supports students to understand how children learn and to explore understandings of effective teaching. I will discuss my experiences of assessing learner transformation during my time as coordinator (2005-2009) of a professional studies course on a postgraduate programme of initial teacher education¹. I will outline key elements of transformative practice in teacher education, and will discuss some of the challenges associated with assessing transformation on a programme which acts, in part, as a first line gatekeeper of professional standards².

Transformation in teacher education

The philosophy underpinning the course (05-09) drew on the work of Brookfield (1995) on how critical reflection helps develop professional identity, as well as linking with Palmer’s (1998) concept of teacher education as transformation. Palmer (no date) writes: “Good teaching cannot be equated with technique.” Technical competence is one thing, but the heart of good teaching lies in the human dimensions. A teacher is much more than a store of knowledge about subject content and pedagogy – they are a complexity of values, understandings, emotions, thoughts and perceptions. With this in mind, the course team and I developed a course which provided key understandings of learning theory and research, but which also encouraged reflection on practice through journal writing and connection to reflective discussion in seminars. In doing this we built on existing elements of the course

¹ The Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) which runs for one academic year.

² In order to ‘pass’ the postgraduate teacher education course, assignments are written which assess knowledge and understanding derived not just from course aims, but also from the set of competencies defined by the professional regulatory body (the General Teaching Council for Scotland).

developed by the previous course leader who had reoriented the content of the professional studies element to focus on building students' professional identity. We also built on understandings from research in teacher education over the last 30 years which has increasingly emphasised the need for students to think about what it means to *be* a teacher rather than simply thinking about what skills they need in order to teach.

Developing understanding of teaching and learning is a complex process. At the beginning of the course, some students think there is a formula for good teaching and that what we will do as teacher educators is tell them this formula. The realisation that there is no single effective way to teach, coupled with the plethora of evidence that different approaches to teaching can be successful in different contexts, can leave students feeling overwhelmed as they try to work out which approaches are best under what circumstances. This 'practice shock' can cause psychological and emotional distress (see Stokking et al. 2003). Some students embrace the uncertainty and take on the learning as a journey: others are disquieted by it and seek solace in the many books on teaching which amount to hints and tips, suggesting that what works in one classroom situation will always work.

Many teaching students go through a 'U-curve' of responses during initial teacher education: beginning with positive anticipation, moving into a 'survival' phase, then a phase of disillusionment, before entering a period of renewed anticipation (see Meijer et al, 2011, 119). One student I interviewed from the 2006 cohort said:

I think [the course] knocked you right back, and then you started to question everything you did – absolutely everything. But then gradually it builds you up more, so that at the end you feel confident that you have the ability behind you: the confidence is justified. That's one responsibility the tutors have got, a huge responsibility, because you start off with nothing and then you build up. (Forde et al. 2006, 42)

This student highlights some of the elements often seen in transformative learning: feelings of disequilibrium, questioning of assumptions and viewpoints, and the eventual building of

competence and confidence based on new understandings (Gravett 2004, 261). For some, the professional studies course was a transformative experience; for others, levels of dissonance were felt which led them to reject the new ideas, or to value only those which fitted with their pre-course thinking.

Assessing transformation

The first challenge was to design assessments which would meet the gatekeeping need while also assessing transformation in professional understanding and development of teacher identity. We developed two assignments to assess transformation over time. The major (3000 word) assignment (submitted towards the end of the course) asked students to reflect on an aspect of teaching and learning which had particularly interested them. The students were asked to discuss how key theories and research had influenced their understandings of teaching and learning and to reflect on how this new knowledge had helped them to shape their professional practice. The reflective element was central, but reflective ability does not just occur - it has to be developed. In this lay the next challenge.

To support students to develop critical reflective skills, we developed an on-line course element which explored what reflective practice is and offered advice on developing reflective writing through journal keeping. Based on their journal, the students produced a 1500 word assignment which was submitted at the end of the first semester. This assignment asked them to reflect on a key incident from their first teaching experience, explore how that incident had challenged their thinking about their role as a teacher and helped them to develop understanding of their individual constructs of professionalism. The assignment acted to give a grade but also gave formative feedback on reflective writing and thinking.

The third challenge lay in the nature of reflective writing. Many students found the first assignment difficult: even the use of the personal pronoun caused anxiety. Coming from degree backgrounds where academic writing is predicated on the impersonal and objective, using a highly personal style of writing was a culture shift in itself. In academic writing, the use of 'I' is often considered 'unscholarly', relating to 'mere opinion' (Lindsay et al. 2010, 271). Students who spoke with me about the first assignment mentioned their reluctance to

use first person, asking whether it was acceptable to state their opinions. This then led to discussion about the difference between reflection and opinion: reflective writing cannot rest solely on opinion, although initial assumptions about the nature of teaching should be considered. Unless these assumptions are explored against evidence (from classroom experience, from research and from theory) the danger is that students will cling to models of what they *think* will be effective (even in the face of evidence to the contrary) and will not develop an approach which allows them to shape their practice in response to changing classroom events and different learner needs.

What became apparent with the first assignment was the very high levels of anxiety from many students. Course tutors worked hard to support them through their anxiety, and by the time the students were writing the second assignment, even though not all had achieved high grades for the first, anxiety over the reflective element had diminished. In terms of assessing the work, progress in thinking about practice was demonstrated by many students – though not all. However, another challenge related to the function of grading students' work. As soon as students know their work is to be graded, anxiety follows and assignments tend to be completed because they must be (rather than because they help students to learn). In course feedback, many students stated that the assignments had helped them to explore their practice, which was a positive outcome. But no written assessment can give us a truly rounded picture of learner transformation: I learn much about the transformations my students undergo by listening to them during the discussions we have in the professional studies seminars when shifts in thinking about professionalism become apparent (as does growth of professional identity).

We have now (on the PGDE course) moved to having one assignment for the professional studies element, which is submitted in January after only one block of teaching experience. The assignment has become more aligned to a standard 'academic' response, since students' ability to reflect on their progress is limited by their lack of classroom experience. Responses to the current 3000 word assignment tend to rest on evaluations of theory and research rather than on deep reflection about professional identity and practice. This does not mean that we

do not see high quality responses to the assignment: we do, but they are no longer responses which allow in-depth assessment of transformation or development of professional identity.

For me, the heart of assessing transformation in beginning teachers should rest on their personal response to key issues: the importance lies in connecting research, theory and practice to *the self*. My role as a tutor is to support this aim. I cannot put it better than did a teacher educator when I interviewed her for a research project. I asked her what were her aims when she worked with student teachers? She replied that she resisted

a narrow view of the teacher and the kind of skills a teacher should have...
I'm quite open to them being very different teachers at the end [of their course]... I don't want them to go out and think or be told 'if you're more like the teacher in the next class you'll be more successful'. (Forde et al. 2006, 48)

This is the challenge of transformative teacher education: to develop assignments that move away from a grading and gatekeeping role towards reflective writing about individual experience and professional learning. It is the narrative reflection of each individual student that offers tutors an important source of information about the ways in which beginning teachers construct their understandings of what it is to be a teacher.

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